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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 SANTO DOMINGO 003250

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DEPARTMENT FOR DRL/AWH GMAGGIO, DRL/IL AANZLDUA

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: EAGR ELAB PHUM DR  
SUBJECT: CONTROVERSIAL PRIEST, BATEY ACTIVIST RECALLED TO  
NEW YORK FROM DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

REF: SANTO DOMINGO 2790

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¶1. Sensitive but unclassified -- protect accordingly.

¶2. SUMMARY: Father Christopher Hartley, an outspoken and controversial advocate for worker rights on the Dominican sugar plantations (bateyes), has been unexpectedly recalled to New York. Church spokesmen claim that the recall was a routine personnel matter and was not politically motivated. Curiously, Father Hartley has not responded to e-mails from Embassy political officers requesting clarification on the reassignment. Father Hartley's efforts have met with some success, but it is unknown whether his Dominican successor will continue in his footsteps. END SUMMARY.

¶3. Father Hartley was one of two foreign Catholic priests whose controversial efforts to improve working conditions on Dominican bateyes have drawn publicity from around the world. The other, Father Pedro Ruquoy of Belgium, was recalled last year in disgrace after it was discovered that he had arranged fraudulent adoptions for Dominican-born children of Haitian descent. The adoptions were allegedly arranged in order to legalize the children's status in the country, as the Dominican Government routinely refuses to issue basic documents (like birth certificates) to children born to Haitian parents.

¶4. Father Hartley has long been a strident human rights advocate for the predominately-Haitian workers residing in bateyes near San Pedro de Macoris. His work often brought him into direct conflict with both the Dominican government and the Vicini Corporation, which owns much of the land where Father Hartley ministered. By the end of his tenure Father Hartley was forced to travel in the company of a Dominican army escort, who ostensibly provided him with protection but likely also tracked and reported his movements to the government.

¶5. Although Church spokesmen in both countries insist that the reassignment was a routine personnel matter, the manner in which the move was conducted raises some questions. As recently as a month before his departure Father Hartley appeared to have no knowledge of his impending reassignment. When asked during an August 25 meeting with political officers how long he planned to remain in the country, Father Hartley answered that he hoped to stay "several years more." He certainly made no indication that he planned to depart his parish anytime soon -- on the contrary, he spoke of long-term projects that he was only just beginning. In recent weeks,

Father Hartley has declined to respond to repeated e-mail requests, further complicating efforts to clarify the circumstances surrounding his departure.

¶6. The Archbishop charged with managing his district here in the Dominican Republic has indicated that a Dominican priest will soon be assigned to fill Father Hartley's currently vacant position.

¶7. The public comments sections of online news articles announcing Father Hartley's departure were filled with offensive and racist remarks targeting Father Hartley and the Haitians he assisted. Father Hartley was called an "enemy of the Dominican people" (as well as other less savory things) by online commenters, although some did voice support for his efforts.

¶8. Father Hartley can take satisfaction in some notable improvements instituted during his tenure. Reftel notes, for example, that: the Vicini Corporation (the most frequent target of his efforts) has taken action to discontinue annual importation of trafficked workers from Haiti. The company no longer allows children to work its fields. Substandard living barracks have been bulldozed and replaced with more humane residences, both on Vicini property and on government-owned land. Vicini workers are now paid in cash instead of in company vouchers. A series of filmmakers and human rights activists have documented the plight of Haitian batey workers in books, articles, and television documentaries.

¶9. Yet Father Hartley had hoped to accomplish much more. During his August 25 meeting with Embassy political officers he emphasized three key unmet demands: First, that workers be provided with electricity. Second, that workers be provided a job contract which clearly states the conditions of their employment (this is also a requirement under Dominican law). Third, that the company provide supervision

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at each of the weighing stations. Hartley says that fraud is a huge concern at the weighing stations, and that workers are often shorted in the assessment of their tonnage and underpaid for their work.

¶10. Working with local attorneys, Hartley had been preparing the groundwork to launch class-action lawsuits demanding for batey workers not only written work contracts, but also accountability for medical insurance deductions. It is unclear what will become of these and other projects after the arrival of his successor at the end of the year.

BULLEN